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ABSTRACT

Findings about black language and speaking behavior may help increase understanding and accommodation of black students in education. While something is known about Black English as a medium of communication, little is known about the language itself. The teacher must learn to recognize basic linguistic and performance features of black English, as well as the varieties and systems of speaking style and values. The language should be seen as not just a linguistic system but as the expressive system of black culture. In sociolinguistic terms, Black English and Standard English differ both socioculturally, in the relationship and expectations of speaker and listener, and in world view, through the role of the speaker as performer. This difference in cultural focus is reflected in both performance patterns and the devices available, by convention, to the performers. This is most observable in adolescent and young adult talk, especially among men. The basic problem in defining features of Black English arises from the multitude of varieties that have evolved and are purposefully maintained. Until other meaningful adaptive techniques are introduced, Black English should be respected in education. (MSE)

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THE ADVANTAGES OF BLACK ENGLISH

Roger D. Abrahams

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The Advantages of Black English

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I am concerned here that we are still conceiving of black speakers of Black English as somehow disadvantaged. To be sure, the term "disadvantaged" arose during a time when there was a well-meaning attempt being made to focus public attention on the degree of deprivation, in regard to political and economic resources, endured by Afro-Americans, Chicanos, Indians, and other peoples stigmatized because of their skin-color and their cultural differences. In the economic sense, there is little doubt that the lower class members of such enclavements are "disadvantaged," even "deprived." But these words have been used in a much wider sense, in reference not just to resources but to abilities; and all manner of tests have been devised which have guaranteed that the image of cultural and social deficit (or pathology) would persist. Such a definition-by-negation has endured and proliferated. Our image of all of these groups has changed little, though our descriptive vocabulary has picked up a few nouns and adjectives. We continue to define those peoples who speak differently and who follow different styles of life in terms of how they depart from our ways, how they disrupt our set of expectations.

The time has come to rid ourselves of this pattern of thinking and acting, and it must start right here, with educators who are concerned with language, for it is here that some of our greatest insights into social and cultural differences have been achieved. We must begin by admitting that the idea of linguistic deprivation or pathology — an idea calculated to assuage the consciences of unsuccessful teachers of Standard English — is utterly meaningless, and that this is especially true of blacks in the United States. As every ethnographic observer of black communities has pointed out, blacks place an extremely high prestige factor on the effective use of words, (e.g. Abrahams, 1964; 1970; Hannerz; Liebow; Mitchell-Kernan; Kockman). The problem then is not that black children are verbally deprived (as the social psychologists have told us with wearying regularity), but that we as teachers have not yet found ways to channel their creative energies and burgeoning verbal dexterity within the framework of the standard curricula.

But it is too easy to point the finger at the teacher and demand the requisite *mea culpas*. That is almost a ritual at meetings of this sort, so much so that teachers now come prepared to do so at the drop of a pencil, except for the hardest or stubbornest of you. What I have come to do, rather, is to review some things that have been discovered in the last few years concerning

black language and black speaking behavior, to point out some information which we don't have yet but which we need desperately, and to suggest some ways in which classroom procedures might be altered so that our insights may be incorporated with a minimum of educational disruption.

I will begin by pointing out the obvious — that if teachers have no respect for students and their manner of speaking, that these students will learn very quickly to be aggressively silent. No teacher can afford to entertain the notion that black students speak a broken language, an unacceptable non-standard dialect which indicates the incapacity to think clearly, to learn, to control their environment. Today we simply know too much about how the so-called Negro Non-Standard or Black English dialect is consistently structured, and how very adequate this speaking system is as a medium of communication (which is what I understand language is used for). We have a number of recent studies mostly carried out by members of the staff of the Center for Applied Linguistics, which survey the elements of the structure and the history of Black English in the United States (Shuy; Stewart; Wolfram; Fasold). Further, we have a number of more impressionistic but nonetheless useful descriptions of how the speaking behavior of blacks operates on a systematic basis. (Mitchell-Kernan reviews this scholarship.)

Yet in spite of this research, there is no clear understanding of just what "Black English" means. Given my training in folkloric performance analysis, I distrust distinguishing one language from another strictly on the basis of a few phonological or morphological features. My experience in working with Afro-American communities in the Philadelphia ghettos, in Texas, and throughout the British West Indies has led me to believe that the features regarded as characteristically Afro-American both from within the community and from without concern not just only linguistic habits but speaking behavior in general. This means that the way in which Black English is described and put to educational use must involve a great many more dimensions than just distinctive sounds, or different systems of putting sentences together. Other elements of Black English must be thoroughly understood: the rules of appropriateness for different occasions; the ways in which the speaker relates to his hearers and what he expects in return; the kinds of speaking devices which separate one segment of the group from another; and those which unite the community in the face of a common threat; and so on. Language itself is only one facet of communication, and communication is only one facet of an entire social system — albeit the most important one for Afro-American groups. To recognize the speaking system and to capitalize upon it in the educational enterprise one must bear these performance features in mind.

The only way that the teacher can utilize Black English is first of all to *listen* to it; he must learn to recognize not only its basic linguistic features but

also such elements as who is speaking to whom, for what purpose and to what effect, realizing that behavior observed in one situation with one age-group will change radically when the circumstances are altered. I realize that this means that I am asking teachers to bear in mind a number of variables at the same time, ones which are usually discernible by using a number of rather esoteric techniques. The complexity of these elements is characteristic of all English speech, black and otherwise, for everyone has not just a language, but also an entire system of speaking behaviors. It is this system which must be explored if we are to understand the functional operations of Black English.

Every language, from the social point of view, is made up of a number of varieties, each designating and symbolizing membership in a segment or subgroup of the speaking community. These varieties are forms of the language, like baby or child talk, man's or woman's talk, which contain features recognizable to members of the speaking community, and used by them to make some kind of social demarcation. Each speaking system, then, is made up of a number of these varieties, each of which is describable in terms of its own discrete performance features. Though it has not been done very often, especially in codes of English, these discrete features are easily ascertained because they are commonly conscious to both the primary users of the variety and to most other members of the community as well. It is not difficult to elicit the basic features, for instance, of baby talk in Standard English, for one informant would be liable to be able to give the entire repertoire of the discrete features making up this subsystem. Black English, like all other languages, is a conglomerate of varieties.

The importance of this point emerges when we realize that even the sociolinguists who have done the most precise descriptive reporting of Black English features have not taken these variety differences into consideration in their analyses. Because such code-distinctions do not seem to have been considered in the collection and presentation of the data, we are given little idea from which variety or varieties these distinctly Black English features have been taken. What is needed is a framework in which larger patterns of communicative interactions, especially performances, may be considered, a framework which will not only bear on linguistic differences between Black English and Standard English but also the differences in the systems of speaking behavior. Only then will we understand the persistence of Black English in spite of the obvious pressures for linguistic acculturation.

There are crucial differences between Black English and Standard English in regard to speaking decorum, that is, in regard to the expectations carried into the communicative encounter and the means by which disruptions of these expectations are taken care of. Though some of these differences are, indeed, to be observed on the linguistic level, there are numerous other devices of

communication which are more far reaching in their differences, because they are not, like the linguistic features, so self-evident. The difference between eye-contact behaviors, for instance, has often been commented upon because it has led many teachers into misunderstanding black students. The unwillingness of blacks to look a teacher in the eye has often been read as either a sign of inattention, or hostility, or embarrassment, or worse; but if this teacher had taken the time to observe the behavior of black children at home he would have noted that such eye-aversion signals proper deference to older people. What is perhaps more important is that if a student, especially a teenager, does look the teacher in the eye, this is a sign of an impending more overt display of hostility. There are numerous other cross-cultural mistakes of this sort, committed because of a lack of familiarity with such differences in BE behaviors—a lack arising from an unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of a different communications-decorum system, or simply from an assumption that the blacks operate in terms of no system at all.

There are many other failures of communication which stem from a misreading of some facet of BE. Gerald Suttles points out one of these in interactions between Italians and Negroes in a Chicago slum neighborhood centering on the use of "jive talk," one of the varieties of BE recognized by both blacks and whites as characteristically Afro-American:

... The Italians seldom use any of this vocabulary even to the point of understanding it. In the case of "jive," however, the Italians do not regard language differences so much as an attempt to talk behind someone's back, "show off" one's knowledge of urban ways or display one's emancipation from the homely virtues of family, ethnic group, and neighbors. To the Italians, the use of "jive" often indicates a person who has scuttled the surest signs of human feeling and concern for the bonds that secure personal relations within the neighborhood. To the Negroes, . . . a familiarity with this youthful jargon is only a sign of a willingness to expand the magic circle of trust beyond that of family, ethnic group, and territorial compatriots. (Suttles, 65)

The point here is that speech differences exist in other dimensions than pronunciation or sentence structure; there are others which evidence deep-seated cultural disparities. Such failures of understanding go far beyond matters of developing a mutually comprehensible universe of discourse; they are concerned with a real clash of both styles and values.

One final example of a failure of communication arising from such cultural differences recently came to my attention. In a classroom of black students, there was a good deal of uproar of the usual sort. The white teacher, seeking to bring the situation to a halt, saw one of the students opening his mouth

and making communicative sounds, what she interpreted (and probably rightly) to be words. She thereupon called out his name and told him "to stop talking." His reply was "I wasn't talking." A small altercation then occurred because the student clung to his story. This episode, reported to me by a black teacher-trainer raised in a lower class community, was interpreted by her as a failure in intercultural communication. The teacher was justified within her own frame of reference to refer to the boy's activity as "talking." But his claim was not that he was not making noise, just that he was not "talking." They meant two different things by that word. What she meant was that he was speaking discrete words; what he meant was that he did not have the attention of the others in the class, and that he therefore could not be accused of "talking," being the instigator of the speaking event. He was saying, at least in part, that he was simply responding in an appropriate way to the performance of one of his peers, by answering "talk" with "sounds" (functionally analogous to the "amen-saying" characteristic of lower class black sermonizing).

This leads us to the central features of my argument: that BE is not just a linguistic system but the expressive system of black culture. This system includes not only all those linguistic features which have been noted in the past, but also the numerous paralinguistic traits which are regarded as characteristic of black speech (elongation of words or raising pitch level for emphasis, use of a wide range of vocal effects, from falsetto to false bass to growl, unexpected slowing or speeding of delivery, emphasizing unexpected syllables or words, and so on) and the even more important marked features of black performance patterns.

In these sociolinguistic terms, there are two levels of importance in which BE and SE differ. On the sociocultural level, these disparities arise from what varieties exist, who uses what code with whom and for what purposes; this is the level on which one would investigate the range of varieties and the correlations between these varieties and the social segmentation within the speaking community. (In the case of BE, it would also, of necessity, include the ways in which features of BE are used to articulate the community of blacks in the face of white onlookers.) On the second level, that of perspective or world view, the differences between BE and SE have to do with the disparity between how the two groups organize their environments, especially with regard to what expectations are carried into a communicative encounter. What will follow is a simplification of a complex phenomenon, the world of black performance; for brevity's sake I will make reference primarily to those features which dramatically depart from the analogous world in which SE functions. (For a fuller sociolinguistic description of BE, see my other works listed in the bibliography, esp. 1970b)

In the black expressive system life is constantly pictured as a performance

and acts judged accordingly. Where the SE universe of discourse makes a strong distinction between dramatic-type performances and other types of interactional behavior like conversations, this is not made in BE. Rather, all expressive behavior is judged as a performance — that is, in terms of its ability to affect onlookers, drawing them into some type of sympathetic participation. This does not mean that all effective performances are judged as good (though there would be a tendency to do so) but rather goodness on this score is judged in regard first to the appropriateness, and then whether the audience had "gotten with it" or "into it," responding with their participation in the event. To be sure, SE designates "acts" as being units in both formal and informal encounters; but the important difference between SE and BE is that the SE speaker expects conversations to be unplanned, spontaneous; if there are rules and conventions, they are unconscious, unstylized. We come to know the rules only through the breaking of them, in situations of embarrassment or in social gaffes. All BE encounters, on the other hand, gravitate toward conscious stylization and the speaker therefore expects to be judged in terms of how well he invests his performance energies and uses the conventional devices which are situationally called forth. He knows that among other things, his variety of BE will be judged by its appropriateness, and that he will be judged in terms of his command of that variety. This is not just true of jive-talkers; the very women within the black community who most scorn that code (regarding it as rude, sensing that it is an attack on them), constantly remark on each other's control over the variety appropriate to their family-centered life-style.

Just as there is an expectation of performance even in situations regarded as casual in the SE speaking system, there are a number of other distinctions central to SE usage that are not followed in BE. There is no great importance placed on divisions between modes of performance; rather, a term for a stylistic device like "jive," "signifying," "marking" (mocking), will refer to the full range of both verbal and kinesic activities. Similarly, singing will always elicit a dancing of the song, and dancing is likely to bring on a song. Speeches, sermons, any kind of verbal routine is liable to shift into singing or dancing. Distinctions in performance are more likely to be made in regard to modalities, like "cool," "hard," "heavy," "funky," etc.

But the most important discrepancy between SE and BE in this realm are the distinctions made in SE between performer and audience, speaker and hearer, and so on. In our interactions we expect silence on the part of the hearer, whether in conversation or more stylized performance. Response is expected only when there is a cue given by the performer unless one is willing to be rude. There is consequently great psychic distance created between performer and audience in SE stylized interactions, a distance which is relied upon by the performer and manipulated by him for his desired effects. Any feedback in such a situation, unless it is under strong controls, is reacted to as a threat, and

will generally modify the effect of the participative interaction. This sense of removal has become progressively institutionalized with the greater reliance on media of record which permits total control of noise by the performer — in books, recordings, TV, and the movies.

BE has a pattern of expectation which is almost diametrically opposed. The psychic distance of the SE performance system is regarded as coldness by BE users; rather they expect a high degree of complementary audience participation in answer to their efforts. This is how they judge their effectiveness, and how they are judged by the audience. The black performer does not try to astound the audience so much as to get them "into it," setting up conventional rhythms that will elicit the vital response of the audience. In fact, he attempts in some way to establish a dialog relationship with them, and his best performances will arise when dialog turns into playful competition. Further, performance contests produce the most active response on the part of both participants and audience and result in the best exhibition of their abilities.

This set of differences in performance patterns and expectations reveals an even deeper difference of world views. Performance to an SE audience (and to Westerners in general) is regarded as a *thing*, to be judged in terms of integrity, verisimilitude and control over media. A work of art is developed upon, most commonly, in regard to how it will end. It is successful if it has a sense of wholeness to it, especially if it enlists our interest (quieting us), builds upon this, bringing it to a climax, and providing us with a sense of relief or catharsis when the climax comes. Black performance, on the other hand, is not a thing but an aspect of a process, and that process is codeterminous with life itself. Therefore, performance goes on all of the time, not just in performances but in principle. The performer activates this ideal of performance, being the channel through which vitality achieves formal expression. His task is not to make a thing but to bring about an experience in which not only his creative energies but the vitality of others may find expression. Therefore his specific performances need have no sense of wholeness; they are part of what Leroi Jones has called the ongoing "Art of Be-ing." Energy exists; it is up to the performer to activate it and then for the group to demonstrate it together, with the performer acting as leader. (For examples of this, you need only go to a lower class black religious observance or to a James Brown concert. Or more dramatically because of our usual expectations, go to a movie in an Afro-American neighborhood.) In the system of BE performances, the subject-object split is anathema, as is the consequent focus on the work of art and the effect of catharsis. Catharsis provides a sense of relief through artistic control — that is, through a sense of enactment of troubling matters in the safe environment of a play world. Black performances rather engage a sense of living keyed into the underlying orders and energies of cultural existence. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but emphasizing one at the expense of the other does

make them seem opposed to each other. It is easy to see, especially in the most stylized of performances, just how much disruption of expectations occurs in confrontations of BE and SE speaking behavior systems.

To this point, the discussion of the social dimensions of Black English has emphasized the performance pattern and the way in which the community expects this pattern to be carried out in eliciting participation and a total verbal and kinesthetic response. In an environment of this sort, because it is the performance which brings the group together and celebrates not only life but also the mutuality and community of experience, the performance is not only constantly expected and valued but the performer is given a high degree of status. The performer is not only one who places himself in the center of the performance operation, capitalizing upon these expectations; he is also permitted his position by his ability to demonstrate his control over the expressive devices appropriate to the occasion. This means, among other things, that the adept performer will be one who is highly conscious of the alternative varieties of language and who will therefore be able to manipulate these differences to demonstrate his abilities.

This focus on the performer as epitomizing the highest capacities of the group by channeling vitality into participation is, then, another feature of black culture which departs considerably from that of Middle America. One of the by-products of the subject-object split and the distinction between casual behavior and non-casual performance has been a relegation of the performer to the periphery of our cultural concerns. The art objects or set-pieces which are his stock-in-trade are valued, to be sure, but they are not regarded in the same way that an elegant useful piece of machinery is. The performer is given license to perform so long as he doesn't intrude himself too deeply on our everyday lives. He lives on the periphery of our existence, unless we happen to function in an artists' society.

This difference of cultural focus is reflected not only in performance patterns but in the devices available, by convention, to the performers. The configuration of techniques which are characteristic of black performances contributes to a focus on the performer and his acts whether in contest or not. Perhaps most important of the devices is the large number of intensifying techniques which call attention to the performer's role in setting things in motion: metaphors, slang terms, highly kinesthetic verbs, nouns descriptive of stylish items, and the already described paralinguistic features of elongation, variable stress patterns, and so on. Furthermore, since the performer as hero is identified with the experiences common to the group, he is free to use the first person singular pronouns, a technique which I have in the past referred to as the "intrusive 'I.'" (Abrahams, 1964). He calls upon terms which are ambiguous in their denotative meanings, which can mean one thing or its opposite,

and therefore the performer's usage must be closely attended to for meaning to be established. ('Funky', and 'heavy' are examples). Finally, and perhaps most important, the black performer has learned to take high affect words and attitudes which are negative in the SE world and to convert them into positive features. He has done this with words like "bad," "tough" and "cold," and with the entire white set of negative stereotype traits of blacks, which are embodied in their narratives as positive attributes. (See Abrahams, 1970a)

The aspects which I have emphasized are most observable in adolescent and young adult talk, and are mostly associated with men. This brings us to the basic problem in pointing to the defining features of BE, for there are a number of segments of the lower class black community each of which is identified with a specific variety of BE. Some of these seem more black only because they contain more dramatically different and/or stigmatizing features than the other varieties.

This is true, for instance, of recent immigrants from rural Southern communities, for their speech is old-fashioned and therefore from the men's perspective, not "hip," and from the women's not as "sweet" as they would have it (by which they often mean too distant from conversation SE). Similarly, the peer-grouping which is so important in the socialization of blacks is reflected in the relegating of baby talk and kid talk to a despised place (except when performed between those to whom it is appropriate), once again judging by "jive" terms. Jive, in another frame of reference, is associated with carefree, friendship-oriented male society, and is therefore contrasted by women with their more genteel "sweet" manner of speaking. Women talk is associated by them with their code of "respectability" and with the values of the home. Their approved variety is closer to certain aspects of SE and this is one reason why the women have found greater linguistic acceptance and social mobility. Man talk, on the other hand, is part of the masculine self-image and is deeply involved in the proclamation of his style-centered "reputation." (Cf. Wilson) It is also more troubling to whites because of its defiant strength and its maximizing of the differences between it and the "sweet" talk of women. Here the similarities between women's talk and SE are also crucial, for a dramatic rejection of the standards of the former is read by whites (especially teachers) as a rejection of the latter.

Black English includes all of these varieties and more, city and country, man and woman, etc. Each of them is maintained as long as the group persists which the variety symbolically represents. Some of these groups, like kids and country people, are capable of shedding their stigmatized variety and taking other varieties into their repertoire. Others see stigmatization as simply being part of their social well-being, for they see the stigmatizing group as the enemy.

They therefore maintain their speaking behavior as a way of contesting with these others; this is especially so in the opposition between the jive talk of the young and the variety spoken by their parents and other elders, and in the opposition between men and women which arises after adolescence. It is also increasingly true of the talk of black militants in confrontations with whites; there we have witnessed black speakers of SE utilize some of the most stigmatized features of BE to achieve their contentious effects.

Having made this survey of devices, patterns, varieties and uses of Black English, we are now in a better position to ask the biggest question confronting the language arts teacher — why has it persisted in spite of the obvious pressures for the community to lose it? Clearly the answer lies in two directions. BE has maintained itself because of its adaptability in a situation in which flexibility meant ability to contend and endure. More specifically, the use of BE in performance provides an on-going and vital cohesive expression which is recognizable as characteristically and uniquely black. Through these performances, the group may act together, grooving to the same rhythms. This is, as I understand it, what is usually meant by "soul." These performances embody the process-oriented, creatively competitive world view, in an act of Be-ing.

But if this black esthetic were the only basis for retaining BE, that speaking system would at least have gravitated away from the most stigmatizing of the BE traits. But a number of other social forces enter here. Because of the nature of child training, the variety they first learn is filled with the most rejected of BE linguistic traits. They learn to speak from others who speak this variety, those immediately older than themselves. And this is the only code they bring into the first-grade classroom situation — and we know how they are greeted because of this. But other varieties are added in the black socialization process. But these codes may also contain stigmatizing features, especially if the child is male. Because of subsequent oppositions between youth and age, and between men and women, a number of these other traits stigmatized by SE speakers have been maintained and have proliferated; these are deeply identified by the young and the man with a stylish and positive image of themselves. Because of the functional necessity to maintain this friendship-based peer grouping, these forces are stronger than those from mainstream America which would change the most disparate black cultural patterns, and with it, certain varieties and features of Black English. But black culture has provided adaptive patterns which have been crucial factors in the ability to endure. It is asking a great deal to expect lower class blacks to give up this adaptable expressive system that has served them so well for so long. It is not until other techniques of adaptation, other ways of contending with life's difficulties are made available that we should begin to think of doing so. But we might, meanwhile, introduce in an intelligent way, language teaching in black schooling which would offer some social and economic alternatives, should they be in a position to act on them.

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